

# Cultivating Change: How the Middlesex Sheriff's Office and the Restoring Promise Initiative Are Transforming Incarceration for Young Men

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## Introduction

Traditional criminal justice responses have fallen short on meeting the needs of young adults involved in the justice system. Across the country, policymakers are starting to address the legacy of unbalanced policies and practices that have resulted in the uniquely American phenomenon of 2.2 million people being incarcerated—a legacy that disproportionately impacts the poor and young men of color.

Research shows that progressive new interventions are needed and are working.<sup>1</sup>

Under the leadership of Middlesex County Sheriff Peter J. Koutoujian, the Middlesex Sheriff's Office (MSO) in Massachusetts has blazed a trail for youth justice reform in the United States by partnering with the Restoring Promise initiative, a project of the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) and the MILPA Collective.<sup>2</sup> Restoring Promise is a national initiative that confronts mass incarceration by transforming living and working conditions for people in jails and prisons, beginning with young adults.

Young adults find themselves in a developmental stage marked by significant social, emotional, and intellectual growth, and what they experience—particularly during a period of incarceration—is bound to leave an

indelible imprint. For the MSO, this reality presented an opportunity to implement a new, transformative approach to the care and custody of young adults.

The MSO's P.A.C.T. community—People Achieving Change Together—is a repurposed housing unit, innovatively designed for young adults ages 18 to 24. P.A.C.T. opened in February 2018 as the second Restoring Promise site, and Middlesex is the first county jail to have taken this leap.

The release of this document marks the one-year anniversary of P.A.C.T., providing an overview of the unit, the process by which it was created, preliminary findings from an ongoing process evaluation, and reflections on lessons learned to date.



\* Denotes members of the Middlesex Sheriff's Office



## What is P.A.C.T.?

P.A.C.T. is a dedicated housing unit for pretrial and sentenced young adults at the Middlesex Jail and House of Correction in Billerica, Massachusetts, about 30 miles northwest of Boston. Managed by specially trained staff, P.A.C.T. also includes a secondary layer of support offered by a group of carefully selected mentors—incarcerated people age 25 and older who work with staff to facilitate programs and provide emotional support and encouragement to younger adults on the unit. P.A.C.T. is guided by six primary goals, anchored in the belief that all young people can succeed when they return to the community—and that their success begins with their experience on the unit. The primary goals are to do the following:

- Develop a sense of community for people who live and work on the unit.
- Foster a climate of positivity in which trust, fairness, safety, and equity are central.
- Resolve conflicts through restorative justice processes.
- Promote the formation of self-identity grounded in culture and history.
- Facilitate healing-informed approaches, relationship building, and holistic programming.
- Strengthen family relationships through family contact and positive bonding opportunities.

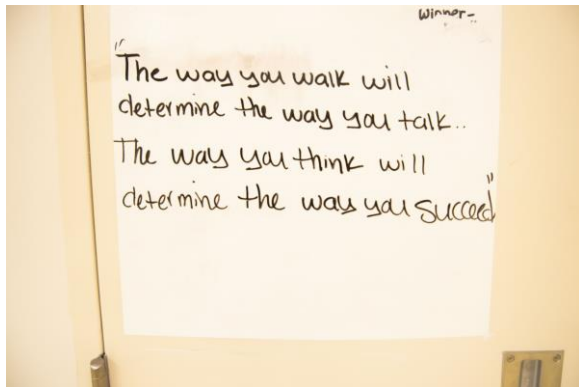
Young adults' participation in P.A.C.T. is not mandatory. People who are interested complete an application and interview process, and, upon selection, are introduced to the unit in small cohorts. Each cohort goes through an orientation to become integrated into the

community, whose members and staff offer various forms of support and encouragement.

P.A.C.T.'s daily schedule is inspired by the German and Norwegian jail and prison systems. Anchored in a commitment to human dignity for incarcerated people, and organized around the goal of preparing people to return home and be successful, jails and prisons use the "normalization principle." This principle stipulates that the daily routine inside a facility should mirror life on the outside as closely as possible, because in the German and Norwegian systems the loss of liberty is the punishment and the conditions of a person's confinement should not be part of that punishment. In P.A.C.T., the daily routine includes group check-ins with staff, educational classes, job responsibilities, and opportunities for group and individual exercise. Throughout the day, staff and mentors impart lessons on life skills that young adults can use during and after incarceration.

Recognizing that the people who work in P.A.C.T. are key to its success, the MSO has worked with the Restoring Promise team to reimagine the role of staff as agents of change. To do so, MSO leadership increased the number of staff in the unit to more closely align with national youth justice best practices. Prior to joining P.A.C.T., staff undergo three weeks of intensive training on topics such as family engagement, motivational interviewing, understanding and working with young adults, healing-informed care, group facilitation, and restorative justice. Staff are responsible for engaging with young people in a variety of ways, such as facilitating groups, participating in activities, helping them with the planning that will prepare them to go home, and lending a listening and supportive ear.

## The process: Moving from idea to implementation



The process by which P.A.C.T. was created is fundamental to understanding its success. Restoring Promise prioritizes the nuanced process of developing young adult units and creating systemic culture change over the replication of a single program. Reform is too often characterized by pendulum swings rather than long-term change. Restoring Promise works to create a new norm, in which change takes hold and is sustained.

In May 2017, the MSO began its process to transform the care and custody of young adults with the Restoring Promise team from Vera and MILPA. In doing so, the MSO agreed to fully commit to the Restoring Promise process:

1. **Prepare:** The reform process began with a collaborative assessment of the culture and climate of the facility. The Restoring Promise team administered a survey to incarcerated young adults and to line staff, focusing on four research-informed guiding principles for youth justice reform: purpose, safety, connection to family and community, and fairness. The Restoring Promise team facilitated research meetings at which they shared the survey results, providing groups

of young adults and staff the opportunity to interpret and discuss the data and offer recommendations for reform.

2. **Design:** Using the baseline data from the preparation phase, the MSO engaged in an intensive design process with the Restoring Promise team. This led to the redesign of a housing unit, including changes to the physical structure and the processes that organize the way it operates—the unit staffing model, employee training, family engagement, daily routine, and conflict resolution.
3. **Implementation:** Staff participated in three weeks of intensive training and devised a strategy to recruit and select participants to live on the unit. Young adults moved into P.A.C.T. in small groups of up to six at a time for the first few months. This implementation strategy allowed staff to practice their new skills with a small group and helped establish and hone the culture of the unit in a meaningful, sustainable way.
4. **Evaluation:** Throughout the implementation phase, which is ongoing, Restoring Promise staff conduct a process evaluation to gauge the unit's progress and development. Team members administer a quarterly survey with questions similar to those on the baseline survey but with some questions tailored to the unit itself. Twice during the four waves of surveys, results are shared with young adults and staff on the unit. (Qualitative findings from these meetings are described in the next section.<sup>3</sup>) This process is used to celebrate successes, manage challenges, and plan for program enhancements.

## (Im)P.A.C.T.: Preliminary research findings

Since its opening in February 2018, the MSO has tracked data and Vera has monitored qualitative findings in an effort to share preliminary outcomes from the initial process evaluation through collaborative research meetings with young adults and staff.<sup>4</sup>

**PURPOSE:** P.A.C.T. is building a culture that prioritizes support and a meaningful daily routine.

Many young adults spoke about how their experiences in P.A.C.T. are fostering their personal development and overall success. When asked whether participating in P.A.C.T. is providing him with the support and skills he needs to succeed, one young adult responded, *“Yes. I just returned from taking a placement test for Bunker Hill Community College. I can’t front—that test was hard, but I stayed and worked through it. In the past, I would’ve fed into my frustration and walked off without completing the test.”* Preliminary findings from parole data suggest that P.A.C.T. participation may be contributing to better outcomes: 37 percent of young adults from the program were approved for parole as compared to 13 percent of people the same age in the general population of Middlesex Jail and House of Correction during the same period.<sup>5</sup>

Young adults stressed the importance of a meaningful daily routine that addresses their individual wants and needs, as well as having supportive staff available to them—factors that participants believe help prepare them to return home and succeed. *“The CO helped me search...for barber schools close to where I live, because I have to rely on public transportation. I feel good about returning to the community*

*and having some knowledge about what is available to help me stay grounded.”*

Staff dedication to young adults’ success was evident not only from comments participants made, but through conversations with staff. One staff member spoke candidly about their investment, *“It’s meaningful work, and you take it personally if a young adult doesn’t succeed.”*

**SAFETY:** Communication, trust, and opportunity are key ingredients to creating a safe environment in P.A.C.T.

According to MSO data, 33 percent of young adults in the general population of the Middlesex Jail and House of Correction were issued at least one disciplinary report, as compared to only 13 percent of their counterparts in P.A.C.T. during the first 11 months of the unit’s operations. But that data does not capture the most important part of the story: not only did fewer incidents occur in P.A.C.T., but they were much less serious in nature. In fact, since its opening, only *one* physical altercation on the unit has been reported. In collaborative research meetings with Vera, young adults were asked whether P.A.C.T. is safe and what contributes to a safe environment. One participant reflected: *“You don’t have to worry about getting into a fight. It’s just a comfortable environment and no one’s trying to mess that up.”*

Another participant attributed the safety of the P.A.C.T. unit to the fact that he and other young adults appreciate the opportunities offered on the unit: *“All these privileges make me rethink how I react. On other units, I wouldn’t care; I would fight right away if something happened.”* Other participants spoke about staff’s ability to de-escalate situations through conflict resolution.

Staff gave similar responses to questions about safety and talked about the unit's progress since opening. As one staff member said, *"When we first came in, they [young adults] didn't trust us. But it has come around."* Staff said that a turning point came when everyone started feeling comfortable with open communication. As another staff member explained, *"The consistency of the open communication. It wasn't just one day; it was every day building relationships."*

**CONNECTION TO FAMILY AND COMMUNITY:** Family and community connections have strengthened, often with facilitation from staff.

Efforts to improve connection to family and community have yielded positive results.

Because young adults spend 16 hours a day out of their cells, they have more opportunities to have contact with their loved ones; in other units, those occasions exist only during limited recreation hours, when *"there would be a line for the phone."*

In this spirit, and to encourage family engagement in P.A.C.T., the MSO abandoned a 25-year-old policy prohibiting contact visits. These visits have contributed to stronger connections. One young adult described his first experience having a contact visit: *"I had a contact visit with my daughter...I was worried she wouldn't remember me because I didn't see or hold her in over a year. It felt good to hold her; I realized how much I have to lose being locked up and away from her."*

Staff have played a significant role in helping foster stronger connections between young adults and their families, as one young adult explained: *"I can stay on the phone [because of time out of the cell], I know what my moms and people are doing in the world, and they know*

*what's going on with me, too."* As the MSO looks to the future, Sheriff Koutoujian and his leadership team are considering ways to address infrastructural and security challenges, with the goal of implementing more extensive family orientations and family engagement meetings. Such advances would help P.A.C.T. practices further embrace the Restoring Promise approach.

**FAIRNESS:** Unit connections contribute to healthier people and a healthy community.

Establishing and maintaining a sense of fairness among young adults requires relationship building and a healthy community. P.A.C.T. promotes a community of fairness through the research-informed guiding principles described above.



Feedback from the collaborative research meetings has indicated that connections *within the unit* are strong, and that a genuine community has developed over time: *"On Thanksgiving, some people didn't have canteen, so a [young adult] went to the kitchen and cooked for all 35 of us."*<sup>6</sup> The MSO organized this Thanksgiving celebration for the unit, which included P.A.C.T. participants and staff seated together at a banquet table for a formal dinner. The young adults came up with the idea of sitting *"as a family,"* and staff on the unit made that possible—further testament to how

P.A.C.T. and its principles are helping build community.

The unit's daily communal activities—like the check-in circles that allow participants to express how they feel on a scale of 1 to 10—work to create a safer space where people's concerns can be elevated and addressed within the community. One young adult discussed the benefits of the daily community check-ins: *"If someone you care about has a low number, it gives you a chance early to see what's up and help them out."*

The young adults' descriptions of the connections in P.A.C.T. also included the monumental role that staff play in cultivating community. One young adult expressed how this has resonated with him: *"The stuff that we do gets acknowledged [by staff]. Successes are celebrated here. I appreciate it; I haven't really had a lot of people growing up who gave me validation."*



Community building has created a humanizing experience that has gone both ways. As one staff member put it, *"Before, they were just numbers and we were just numbers, really."*

## Challenges and lessons learned

It is no small achievement to successfully complete a full year of operating a dramatically different unit for young adults in a county facility. As with any new program, this one involved growing pains and numerous adjustments. It has taken hard work, conviction, commitment—and most important, a willingness on the part of the MSO leadership, staff, mentors, and young adults to try something new. While this willingness has generated many rewards, it is not without challenges, as the collaborative research process has made clear. The following are lessons from which the MSO and the Restoring Promise team plan to draw during the next phase of P.A.C.T. implementation.

- Management of an evolving community of people: The young adults who participate in P.A.C.T. have relatively short sentences, contributing to a high turnover rate. This leads to frequent changes in community dynamics. Although staff and participants have proved adept at responding to the evolving nature of the P.A.C.T. community, turnover presents a constantly changing landscape to navigate.
- Family partnership: Architectural and security challenges made it difficult to advance the implementation of a true, meaningful family partnership plan. The MSO recognizes that this has limited the opportunities for family engagement, and

agency leaders are committed to finding solutions going forward.



- Reentry planning: Staff spoke about the significant challenges young adults face when going through the reentry planning process, and about the desire to be supportive, especially with regard to helping people secure housing: “The services from the state are just not there. There’s only so much we can do. What’re we supposed to do? Give them a train ticket and say ‘See ya’? But what can we do when the outside resources just aren’t there?” The MSO has forged partnerships with local community-based, youth-centered organizations, such as the United Teen Equality Center (UTEC) and Roca, to work on reentry planning with the young adults in P.A.C.T. Staff and mentors at the MSO strive every day to more fully prepare people to return home.
- Mental health needs: Corrections facilities were not designed to face a wide range of mental health challenges or address people’s complex behavioral health needs. The deinstitutionalization of mental health facilities over decades created a crisis marked by insufficient alternatives, resulting in jails available mental health provider. Like most

correctional settings, P.A.C.T. was not designed nor is it equipped to fully meet all of the young adults’ mental health needs. For this reason, the MSO has made a concerted effort to partner with local programs and support services. Although the sheriff’s office has been a committed leader on this front, much work remains to be done.

- Fairness: Conflict is inevitable, but it also provides an incredible opportunity for people to learn from one another, build trust, and promote and demonstrate fairness in their responses. For young adults especially, a sense of fairness—both in perception and in implementation—is often at the heart of successful relationships. The P.A.C.T. unit allows for increased flexibility in responses to conflicts and infractions, and staff review each incident on a case-by-case basis. Restorative justice practices and conflict resolution are key to establishing trust and defusing anxiety and tension while holding people accountable in a fair, equitable manner. Despite these approaches, certain infractions have called for interventions that resulted in the types of discipline that are typical in more traditional corrections settings, including removal from the community. Developing and implementing effective restorative responses that align with the values of Restoring Promise is an ongoing learning process for the staff and participants.

## Conclusion

The past year has shown that progressive, innovative approaches—informed by research and driven by data—are working. As demonstrated in this report, P.A.C.T. is making a difference in the lives of young adults, while working to strengthen families and communities.

The collaboration of the MSO leadership and staff, young adults, mentors, Vera, and MILPA has made this groundbreaking partnership possible. The profound commitment people have to the promise of human dignity and healing will no doubt carry this program forward. As we at Vera and the MSO reflect on how the P.A.C.T. community was built over the past year, we celebrate its successes, acknowledge its challenges, and continue to realize the possibilities ahead. We recognize that more work is left to be done and look forward to embarking on the next steps together.

## Acknowledgments

This report is a collaborative effort between the Middlesex Sheriff's Office (MSO) and the Vera Institute of Justice. It is a culmination of more than a year's worth of hard work and dedication, and there are many people to thank.

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## Credits

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<sup>1</sup> See generally: National Research Council. Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach. (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2013), <https://perma.cc/94DN-EHT5>.

<sup>2</sup> MILPA is a collective of formerly incarcerated people who focus on improving community health and well-being as well as promoting civic engagement and the end of mass incarceration. For more information, go to [www.milpacollective.org](http://www.milpacollective.org).

<sup>3</sup> Findings from the quarterly surveys will be published when the process evaluation is complete.

<sup>4</sup> MSO tracked data involving a sample of 72 sentenced young adults who lived in P.A.C.T.

since its opening on February 5, 2018 through January 1, 2019. During that period, 42 sentenced young adults lived in the facility's general population. Fifteen young adults and 10 staff members participated in the collaborative research meetings.

<sup>5</sup> Based on internal MSO data and parole hearing outcomes.

<sup>6</sup> "Canteen" refers to the commissary available to people incarcerated at the MSO. If someone does not "have canteen," they did not have not have money at that time to make purchases from the commissary.



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